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E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/3/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN: AHMADINEJAD'S STAR FADING IN THE ARAB WORLD?

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (U) This is a joint cable by the Iran Regional Presence
Office and the Dubai Regional Media Hub.

12. (S/NF) Summary: Since Iran's June 12 presidential elections, Arab media have intensely focused their coverage on the demonstrations in Iran and the international community's response to the government crackdown. Whereas in recent years the Arab media have limited their commentary to Iran's external relations -- particularly its regional ambitions and the international implications of its nuclear program -- during the post-election crisis Arab commentators have, for the first time, poked a hole in the veneer of the Islamic Republic's internal political system and explored its underpinnings more closely, often challenging the system's very legitimacy in on-air commentary. A number of these commentators have opined that Ahmadinejad has, at least in the near term, lost standing among some moderate Arabs, who have come to view Ahmadinejad's administration as oppressive, unpopular, and undemocratic, much as they criticize many Arab governments. However, all of the Arab media figures we spoke to emphasized that Arab criticism of Ahmadinejad has not necessarily led to increased support for U.S. policy in the region. On the contrary, closer analysis suggests that Ahmadinejad's eroding popularity in the Arab world has created a scenario in which any U.S. effort to engage the current Iranian government will be perceived by a wide spectrum of Arabs as accommodation with Ahmadinejad.

ALL EYES ON IRAN

13. (S/NF) Iran's post-election crisis has dominated the Arab media's news coverage for the past seven weeks. The demonstrations have garnered special coverage on Al-Arabiya and have consistently been among the top headlines on Al-Jazeera. The marketing director of the Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC), parent company of Al-Arabiya, told IRPO/DRMH that Al-Arabiya's viewership has skyrocketed since the June 12 election. Al-Arabiya's news website has also experienced a dramatic increase in visits from users living in the region between Tripoli and Amman, which the marketing director, a native of Lebanon, attributed to the tremendous interest Sunni

Arabs have in watching the drama in Iran unfold. Coverage of Iran's election aftermath is not limited to straightforward news reporting; editorial pages, media commentaries, and the Arab blogosphere have also been abuzz with debate over the demonstrations, the international community's response, and the implications of these events for the Arab world. While Iran's elections may no longer command daily headlines in the Western media, nearly all the Arab media commentators with whom we spoke recognized that the Arab street remains firmly focused on the recent unrest and continuing political drama playing out in Iran.

THE BENEVOLENT DICTATOR'S FALL FROM GRACE?

14. (S/NF) A Syrian journalist and blogger, who owns a media consultancy firm in Dubai, believes that many in the Arab street initially viewed Ahmadinejad when he came to power in 2005 as a "benevolent dictator." Citing the tradition of the Mahdi, the media consultant argued that both Shi'a and Sunni Arabs are taught from early childhood to await the arrival of a strong and unimpeachable figure who will lead the Muslim world. The media consultant maintained that even secular Arabs view the world, albeit unintentionally, with this ingrained mindset. Our contact argued that Ahmadinejad played in to this narrative, and when Ahmadinejad arrived on the international stage many Arabs saw him, in contrast to their own flawed leaders, as a humble and pious man who was brave enough to stand up for his people and the greater Muslim world by confronting Israel and the West head on. However, both the intensely competitive campaign period and the forceful reaction by the Iranian people to the official election results have led some moderate Arabs to rethink Ahmadinejad's true disposition. The election, the media consultant said, led some Arabs to understand that despite his astutely crafted and well-marketed image in the Arab world,

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Ahmadinejad is resented by many Iranians for domestic mismanagement, incompetence, and corruption. Because of this public fall from grace, so the media consultant told us, Ahmadinejad is no longer the "untouchable, holy figure" in the Arab world he once was -- his flaws have brought him down to the level of the Arab world's own imperfect leaders. An Al-Arabiya executive, speaking at a recent conference, said that the election aftermath had destroyed the image many Arabs had of the Islamic Revolution, and Ahmadinejad's legitimacy as a leader was now open to question. [NOTE: The media consultant attributed Iran's perceived "victories" over the U.S. and the West to Ahmadinejad, as opposed to Supreme Leader Khamenei. While conventional wisdom in the West is that Khamenei has the final say over Iran's most vital interests, including the nuclear program, the consultant's comments suggest that the Arab street views Ahmadinejad as much more influential in the Islamic Republic's decision-making system.]

POST-ELECTION CRISIS NOT A SILVER BULLET FOR ARAB REGIMES

15. (S/NF) Ahmadinejad's fall from grace notwithstanding, most of the Arab media commentators with whom we spoke agreed that Arab governments have a limited ability to capitalize on Ahmadinejad's missteps because of the skeletons in their own closets. Al-Arabiya's former Tehran bureau chief observed that Arab regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who no doubt would like to exploit Ahmadinejad's current vulnerabilities, have remained noticeably silent. In his view, they realize that any statement condemning Tehran's crackdown on peaceful

dissidents would appear untenably hypocritical in the eyes of their own citizens. He considers this public silence yet another "missed opportunity" for Arab leaders to take a stand to counter Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and further detract from his popularity with the Arab street.

NEW SPACE TO DISAGREE WITH AHMADINEJAD AND THE U.S.

¶16. (S/NF) All of the Arab commentators and news media figures we spoke to agreed that the U.S. "played it right" throughout the post-election crisis by staying away from detailed public comments that could be perceived as interventionist. However, the Arab commentators were quick to distinguish between criticism of Ahmadinejad in the Arab street and support for U.S. policies. The Syrian media consultant said that the heated debates before the election, in which the three challengers -- Mousavi, Karroubi, and Reza'i -- publicly criticized Ahmadinejad for corruption and economic mismanagement, made it clear to Arabs that this election was about Iran, not the U.S. This distinction, coupled with the U.S.' restraint in commenting on the election, provided an unprecedented window for Arab commentators to criticize Ahmadinejad without appearing to side with the U.S.

¶17. (S/NF) Examples of this played out during two separate appearances by the Dubai Regional Media Hub Acting Director on live panel discussions on Abu Dhabi TV and Lebanese New TV regarding regional issues, including events in Iran. Whereas fellow Arab panelist resolutely disagreed with her comments in support of U.S. policy in the region, in particular the peace process, they felt free to openly criticize Ahmadinejad's government, which they refrained from doing in the past, for its internal crackdown and regional ambitions. One Saudi commentator contrasted Turkish regional mediation, which he described as a positive force in the region, with Iranian regional intervention, which he called pernicious and destabilizing. A Lebanese commentator noted the irony of Iran accusing outsiders of interfering in its internal affairs when there is not "one corner of the Arab world" where Iran does not intervene behind the scenes.

AHMADINEJAD DOWN BUT NOT OUT

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¶18. (S/NF) As Al-Arabiya's Tehran bureau chief noted, while Ahmadinejad's image may have taken a hit in the Arab street as a result of the government's handling of domestic dissent, the damage is not necessarily permanent. In his view, the Arab street is notoriously emotional and "could easily be turned to support Ahmadinejad once again" with some trumped up slogans and public bravado. The bureau chief believed that, in the perceived leadership void left by Arab leaders on regional issues, Ahmadinejad could rally public opinion by capitalizing on any number of sensitive issues for the Arab street, most prominent among them Israel, at upcoming international fora. The Syrian media consultant, too, cautioned the U.S. not to overestimate any erosion in Ahmadinejad's popularity with Arabs. In his opinion, Ahmadinejad has only lost standing with a segment of moderates in the Arab street; he believes that most Arabs are so polarized, either for or against Ahmadinejad, that the allegations of voter fraud and the violent post-election

crackdown on protesters will not permanently sway their positions one way or the other.

ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAN: NO PLEASING THE ARAB STREET

19. (S/NF) Comment: Once the dust settles on Iran's post-election crisis, Arabs will look to see if the U.S. deals with Ahmadinejad as it pursues its nuclear nonproliferation agenda despite the lingering questions over the legitimacy of his election. If the U.S. enters negotiations with Ahmadinejad's government, moderate Arab observers may argue that the U.S., for the sake of its own national interest, has cut a deal at the expense of pro-democracy advocates -- just as many in the Arab street believe the U.S. has done with a number of Arab regimes. Those Arabs who continue to support Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, may perceive negotiations as a personal victory for a humble leader who brought the U.S. to its knees through steadfast resistance. Thus, Ahmadinejad's "fall from grace" in the Arab world may have created yet another obstacle to improved Arab perceptions of the U.S. -- in which engagement with an Ahmadinejad-led government is now a potentially lose-lose scenario in which Arabs at both ends of the pro- and anti-Ahmadinejad spectrum will consider negotiations with Teheran an accommodation with the Iranian president.

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